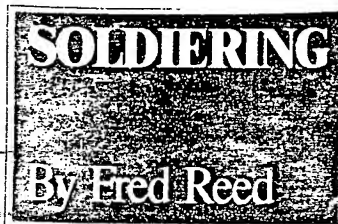


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PAGE 4A



## Did The Post aid the Russians?

As I suppose all in Washington know, The Washington Post recently published a piece on the forthcoming launch of an intelligence satellite, thereby infuriating the Pentagon. The writing of exculpatory articles has since become a small industry at The Post. Sunday, for example, it ran a small novel in the Outlook section to the effect that everyone already knew everything The Post revealed.

Maybe. I don't have the story in front of me and was out of the country when it ran. If The Post can show, as perhaps it can, that every fact has been published in major journals such as Aviation Week, I will regard the paper as innocent. Still, a few thoughts of a general nature:

First, newspapers are not the best arbiters of what should remain secret. Reporters tend to detest the Pentagon, especially reporters from The Post. I don't much blame them: Exposure to the nonsense, evasion and propaganda practiced by the military has to arouse distaste in anyone of normal susceptibilities. Given that the military engages in deception and doubletalk over the unimportant, it should not be surprising to find that reporters don't take its word when it says something is important. Nonetheless, the press is hostile to the military, is self-righteous to an unjustifiable extent, and does work under pressures that favor publishing first and questioning second.

Next, reporters tend to be abjectly ignorant of things technical; editors invariably are. Probably there is no one at The Post who would know a III-V semiconductor from a first derivative. If there is, he is likely to be a ham radio operator in the printing plant. Maybe some of the science writers are better — a couple of them do not make funny mistakes — but I doubt whether they write military stories. Other papers are usually worse than The Post.

This is a bad thing for a paper writing about electronic intelligence. It means that you have liberal-artsy writers dealing with a formidably technical subject. Sure enough, the authors of the piece in Outlook are a political science professor and the director of research on nuclear weapons at the Institute for Policy Studies, for whom no technical qualifications are mentioned. Sure enough, they didn't know enough even to address the right questions.

The Post's original piece contained various details about the satellite — its weight, cost and such like. Let's look at the general question of what can be revealed by such information. Bear in mind that I am not privy to details of satellite design. So what follows is awfully general and hypothetical. It will nonetheless illustrate a point.

Resolution, directionality, band and sensitivity of antennas are deducible from their size and configuration. A gee-whiz statement that the antennas unfold 50 feet on each side of the satellite isn't necessarily harmless. To a designer of satellites, who knows how U.S. antennas are folded for launch, an assertion that the satellite barely fits in the cargo bay may reveal the length of the antennas. A designer, knowing the weights of particular components, may deduce much from a weight figure, for example, that it includes a nuclear reactor, which implies a particularly power-hungry instrument, which can be only one thing.

The time of loading onto the shuttle may imply the need for cryogenic cooling, in turn implying the use of certain types of sensor. A sudden jump in price may imply the perfection of a new technology known to be expensive. And so on. If you know what the satellite can do, you can either develop countermeasures or take steps to render valueless the information gathered.

Did The Post aid the Soviets? The Pentagon yelped pretty loudly not to have been hurt, but I really don't know. I doubt whether The Post knows, or knows what is involved, or how to find out. If it did, its exculpations would be written by an electrical engineer, not a political scientist.